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SPECIAL SECTION: THE BELARUS UPRISING, 2020–2021



Contested elections, protest, and regime stability: comparing Belarus and Bolivia

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the 2020 election and ongoing protest movement in Belarus by comparing them to the contested election in Bolivia (2019) that led to the overthrow of Evo Morales and his MAS party. In each case, a contested election brought about widespread street protests, which called into question the legitimacy of the governing regime. However, only in Bolivia do we see a turnover in state power. In Belarus, Aliaksandr Lukashenka has defied social movement protests and maintained control of the state. This article analyzes the role of the police and military forces and the geopolitical relations of each country and argues that, unlike Bolivia, where Morales's key military allies defected, the Belarusian government has managed to stay in power with the combination of strong coercive capacity and the support of a regional "black knight" – Vladimir Putin's Russia. Such findings open the way for cautious prognoses for the ongoing protests in Belarus.

RÉSUMÉ

L'article examine l'élection de 2020 et le mouvement de protestation en cours en Biélorussie et les compare la situation à l'élection disputée en Bolivie (2019), qui a abouti à la défaite d'Evo Morales et de son parti MAS. Dans chaque cas, l'élection disputée a provoqué de nombreuses manifestations qui ont remis en question la légitimité du régime au pouvoir. Mais un changement du pouvoir n'a eu lieu qu'en Bolivie. En Biélorussie, Alexandre Loukachenko a défié les protestations des mouvements sociaux et maintenu le contrôle de l'État. L'article analyse le rôle joué par les forces de l'ordre et les forces militaires, ainsi que les relations géopolitiques de chaque pays. Les auteurs affirment que, contrairement à la Bolivie, où les alliés clé de Morales ont fait défection, le gouvernement biélorusse est resté au pouvoir grâce à une forte capacité de coercition et au soutien d'un « chevalier noir » régional – la Russie de Vladimir Poutine. De telles conclusions ouvrent la voie à un pronostic prudent concernant les protestations en cours en Biélorussie.

KEYWORDS

Protests; Belarus; Bolivia; regime stability; coercive capacity

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, on 9 August 2020, the Belarusian president, Aliaksandr Lukashenka, was ostensibly re-elected for a sixth term in office with 80% of the vote. However, the 2020 election generated the largest and most important challenge to his 26-year period of rule when masses of Belarusian citizens took to the streets to protest

what they claimed was a corrupt and fraudulent election. Despite the fact that this movement has grown and continues to mobilize against Lukashenka, he has been able to maintain his grip on power.

A mere 10 months before, on the other side of the Atlantic, a similar process played out with different results. On 20 October 2019, Evo Morales was elected for a legally questionable fourth term as president of the small, landlocked South American country of Bolivia. Like in Belarus, masses of Bolivian citizens took to the streets to contest the election, which ultimately led to the downfall of Morales three weeks later.

Without negating the differences between the cases in distinct political and cultural contexts, we believe the two cases are indeed comparable for a variety of reasons and, taken together, shed light on the nature of political power in contemporary states. Morales and Lukashenka were two of the longest-serving leaders in Latin America and eastern Europe, respectively; both leaders employed populist forms of political rhetoric and action to gain and maintain power; both lost political legitimacy and faced popular mobilizations after a contested election; in both countries police used violent means to suppress the protesters, including opening fire on them and using tear gas; and, finally, both openly expressed their negative attitudes toward the West and faced criticism and political pressure from Western actors.

What happened to produce these different outcomes? What can be grasped from these divergent cases to shed light on how states retain power, especially when faced with massive popular uprisings? How important a role do a state's security forces and coercive capacities play in terms of state durability? What is the role of external actors in ensuring regime stability (or not)? Determining the factors that led to the quick success of the protests in Bolivia and the ongoing character of the social movement in Belarus will help to answer these questions.

A large body of scholarship claims that regime durability is related to state strength, of which repression is one important factor. Max Weber famously defined the state as "a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory."¹ Without legitimacy, however, rulers can use coercion only as a tool of repression. At the same time, a state can maintain its stability in the face of internal mass-based protests if its coercive organizations remain coherent and effective.² Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way distinguish between two distinct dimensions of state coercive capacity: cohesion and scope. In cases of weak cohesion, defined as the degree of compliance within a government, political leaders may face open disobedience by subordinates. Scope, in turn, refers to "effective reach across territory and into society."³ Where scope is low, political leaders may not have access to extensive, specialized police forces; security forces are underpaid and lack presence throughout the national territory.

Another strand of the literature focuses on the international dimension of regime durability. It emphasizes the role of so-called "black knights" – democratic or authoritarian external actors that act as guardians of autocracy or challengers of democracy in their respective neighbourhoods.⁴ The argument is that if we are to understand regime persistence, the external dimension must be added to domestic factors. Jakob Tolstrup discusses five instruments of black knight election bolstering: signalling invincibility by aiding in election campaigns, preventing elite defection, undermining opposition

strength, suppressing popular protests, and reducing external democracy promotion.⁵ We expand on Tolstrup's elite-defection election-bolstering instrument by applying it to the situation of mass uprisings.

In this article, we combine the two perspectives outlined above and argue that coercive capacity is a necessary component for regime durability during periods of intense social mobilization, but it may not be sufficient. In addition to coercive capacity there needs to be strong external support from a so-called "black knight." Unlike Bolivia, where Morales's key military allies defected and the conservative opposition took over, the Belarusian government has managed to maintain political power with the combination of strong coercive capacity and Russia's backing that minimized the risk of disloyalty in the coercive apparatus during the mass protests in Belarus.

This work contributes to existing scholarship a comparative analysis of regime durability, based on a state's coercive capacity and the importance of external forces, in the most recent political crises in Bolivia and Belarus. Understanding the ways coercive capacity can be maintained and employed holds the potential to determine a new path for the Belarusian nation, to anticipate future political developments in Bolivia, and to recognize regime durability determinants during times of political crises. The comparison of Belarus and Bolivia demonstrates a vast difference in both coercive capacity and the role of external forces between the two countries. We also observe in the Belarusian case the transformative effect of a "black knight" with stronger coercive capacity, which seems more influential for Lukashenka's survival than the role of law enforcement alone.

We develop this argument by comparing Belarus and Bolivia through two mechanisms that work to ensure the survival of a leader who lost legitimacy among the majority of his own people amid an ongoing internal crisis. We analyze the first mechanism along two dimensions of state capacity: establishing a wide reach by law enforcement across the territory and throughout the population and ensuring the loyalty of security forces. A wide scope helps the regime to effectively extend state capacity and simultaneously suppress protests. High levels of loyalty, in turn, mean that security forces are less likely to defect during a time of crisis. The second mechanism is having a powerful international ally willing to supply material and non-material support, providing external legitimacy and financial resources to help control an internal crisis.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows: sections one and two examine how discontent with the regimes in Bolivia and Belarus arose, developed, and unfolded. The article first looks at the Bolivian case and then moves on to an analysis of Belarus. Section three focuses on key comparisons of the protests in Bolivia and Belarus through the mechanisms of the state's ability to effectively expand its reach across territory and population and ensure loyalty of law enforcement, and the role the external forces played in each case. We conclude by discussing how our findings enhance general knowledge in the area of social movements and democratization studies and offer cautious prognoses for the unfolding situation in Belarus.

Bolivia: the social origins of a political crisis

On 10 November 2019, after weeks of protest following a disputed election on 20 October that would have returned Evo Morales and his Movement toward Socialism (*Movimiento al Socialismo*, MAS) party to power for a fourth consecutive term, the commander-in-chief

of the Bolivian armed forces, General Williams Kaliman, “suggested” that it was time for Morales to relinquish his position for the good of the country. The defection of the military was the final straw for Morales. A number of unions and social movement organizations that had previously been the social base of MAS support had begun calling for his resignation over the previous days, while certain factions of the police also withheld support and failed to stop anti-government protesters from ransacking homes and violently attacking MAS supporters. Morales and a number of other high-level MAS officials complied with the military’s demand, and two days later he and his closest advisors were on a plane to Mexico to ultimately spend the next year in exile.

Why did this happen? In order to answer this question and understand the political crisis, three interrelated yet analytically distinguishable factors are key. First, we need to understand the changing social dynamics between the MAS, its supporters, and the larger field of the Bolivian people. Second, the actual election process and the involvement of international forces, in this case the Organization of American States (OAS), are central to understanding the claims of irregularities and fraud. Finally and decisively, the role of the armed forces highlights the latent threat of violent, physical force that underpins the ability of all modern states to govern. While the crisis seemed to appear out of nowhere, it was a mix of longer-term social dynamics with shorter-term contingencies that came together in such a way in late 2019 to bring about Morales’s ouster.

The contradictory nature of social change

Over 14 years in power, Morales and the MAS provided one of the most popular and productive governments in Bolivia since at least the 1952 National Revolution.⁶ Founded in 1995, the MAS emerged from the fertile valley region east of the Andean high plateau as the “political instrument” of the country’s highly organized coca growers’ unions. Coming to power after a wave of insurrectionary upheaval against neoliberalism from 2000 to 2005, Morales and the MAS were elected on a platform demanding the radical transformation of the country’s political, economic, and social systems.⁷ Morales was elected president three times (2005, 2009, 2014) with an outright majority, which had not happened in Bolivia since 1982. The MAS took control of both houses of congress in both 2009 and 2014. During this period, MAS’s success was bolstered by a boom in commodity prices, and Morales turned those surpluses into massive social welfare gains in healthcare, education and literacy, economic equality, and poverty reduction.⁸ Additionally, while being elected as the country’s first indigenous president was symbolically important, the incorporation of indigenous people, *campesinos* (peasants), and women into positions of political authority represented a cultural sea change for those who had been discriminated against and excluded for centuries.⁹

Nevertheless, dating back to at least 2011, internal fissures between the MAS and its social bases of support have grown.¹⁰ The development of these contradictions demonstrates the manner in which the MAS sought to govern while also providing part of the explanation for the overthrow of Morales. The 2011 conflict over the Isiboro Sécure National Park and Indigenous Territory (TIPNIS) pitted the Morales government against a group of indigenous movements and others opposed to building a highway through a nationally recognized indigenous territory in the centre of the country. The road was just

one project in a flurry of infrastructure development since Morales came to power. While the MAS argued the road was necessary to challenge the power of large landholders in the eastern half of the country and to unify the country territorially, opponents claimed that those indigenous groups affected by the road were not properly consulted. Additionally, opponents argued the road would lead to increased environmental degradation, as it would provide access for illegal logging and the continued expansion of the agro-industrial frontier to spread into a protected forest. Huge protests erupted across the country demanding a halt to the road construction, while indigenous groups from the lowlands staged a march from the eastern city of Trinidad to the western highland capital of La Paz. Midway through the march, demonstrators met with violent repression from government forces, leading to vociferous opposition from many on the Left who until that point had shown support for the MAS.¹¹

While the TIPNIS conflict exposed the MAS to a level of scrutiny from the Bolivian people it had not previously received, the conflict also led to a number of fissures among and within MAS-aligned groups. Opposed to the construction of the highway and pushed further by the government repression of the marchers, a number of indigenous movement organizations split from the Unity Pact (*Pacto de Unidad*) – an assembly of various indigenous and peasant social movements and popular organizations that had provided crucial support to bring the MAS to power and defend the government in its early years. After the Unity Pact fell apart, the MAS responded by fomenting internal conflict within the two key indigenous movement organizations that had withdrawn their support. The MAS's divisive tactics led to the splitting of the Confederation of Indigenous Peoples of Bolivia (*Confederación de Pueblos Indígenas de Bolivia*, CIDOB) in 2012 and the National Council of Ayllus and Markas of Qullasuyu (*Consejo Nacional de Ayllus y Markas del Qullasuyu*, CONAMAQ) in 2013. Not only did the actions of the MAS weaken the autonomous mobilizational capability of these movement organizations, but they also brought further scrutiny and derision upon the MAS from opposition factions and erstwhile supporters alike.¹² No longer could the MAS legitimately claim to be a “government of the social movements.”

These growing antagonisms between the MAS and its organizational and popular base help to explain the failure of a broad-based movement to materialize in the streets to defend Morales and the MAS. Over the course of Morales's time in power, and as the social composition of the MAS expanded to include urban middle classes and wealthy agro-industrialists, it became detached from its organized rural base.¹³ That the indigenous, *campesino*, and labour organizations that had originally brought the MAS to power ultimately failed to rally around Morales during the overthrow of his government is a reflection of these earlier events. Issues more immediately relevant to the disputed 2019 election revolve around questions about whether Morales was in fact a legal candidate, the election process itself, and the role of the OAS in the election's aftermath. In 2016, Morales and the MAS lost a popular referendum to abolish the two-term limit for the presidency as laid out in Bolivia's constitution. Nevertheless, Morales challenged the outcome in court. Overturning the outcome of the referendum, the MAS-aligned courts sided with Morales and claimed that term limits impinged on his human rights, thus opening the path for his ability to run for re-election in 2019. Although the referendum was close, 48.7% in favour of

abolishing term limits to 51.3% opposed, many Bolivians, particularly in the urban middle classes, saw Morales's use of the judicial branch as undemocratic. Thus, an air of illegitimacy hung over Morales during the lead-up to the election.

Contested elections and police and military defections

Coming into the October 2019 elections, the MAS was still the dominant political force in the country. Despite Morales's constitutionally questionable bid for re-election, the majority of polls had Morales and the MAS leading. On the day of the election, as votes were being counted and numbers were coming in, it was clear that this was going to be the closest electoral contest that Morales had faced since becoming president in 2005. His main opponent, the historian and former president Carlos Mesa, headed a coalition composed of various opposition forces from across the political spectrum named Citizen Community (*Comunidad Ciudadana*, CC). Without an organized political and economic vision for the country, CC's main platform was to paint Morales as an authoritarian in hopes of denying him another term. Bolivia's presidential electoral system has the option of going to a second round unless a contender wins 50% of the vote outright, or a candidate gains at least 40% of the vote and has a 10-percentage-point lead over the next contender. In the evening of 20 October, with around 83% of the vote counted, Morales led Mesa by 45% to 38%. It seemed as if the election would be headed to a second round. Then, around 8 pm, election results stopped being updated for a period of 24 hours, and when they were finally updated the following day, Morales had increased his lead with roughly 47% of the vote to Mesa's 36%. This new tally would ultimately provide Morales with an outright win in the first round. On 25 October, Bolivia's Supreme Electoral Tribunal certified the election results, giving Morales the official win.

The interruption in the preliminary voting results led to denunciations of the electoral process by Mesa and other opponents of the MAS, which motivated protests to begin in the streets. In response, Morales asked the OAS to conduct an audit of the election and said he would call for a second-round runoff with Mesa if there was evidence of fraud. The OAS for its part claimed that the change in electoral results after the resumption of the preliminary tally was "hard to explain."¹⁴ In an election audit report issued on 10 November 2019, the OAS claimed "widespread manipulation" and "significant irregularities" during the election and vote count.¹⁵

During the intervening three weeks between the election and the issuing of the OAS report, mass protests rocked the country. The largest cities of La Paz, El Alto, Cochabamba, and Santa Cruz witnessed massive marches, strikes, and blockades. In some areas, electoral offices were set ablaze as police used tear gas to break up the protests.¹⁶ Conservative opposition leaders took advantage of the popular uprisings with calls for Morales to resign. Luis Fernando Camacho, the head of the Pro Santa Cruz Civic Committee, a conservative business association based in the opposition bastion of the eastern lowlands, was the most outspoken in pushing the protests to the right, claiming, "we are not overthrowing a government, we are liberating an entire nation!"¹⁷ Camacho was direct in urging police and military forces to turn against the government and effectively outflanked Mesa as the *de facto* leader of the opposition protests, replacing his calls for a new election with demands for Morales's resignation.

Eventually, on 8 November, various police units did indeed begin to defect and join the anti-government protests, beginning in Cochabamba and then spreading to Sucre, Santa Cruz, Potosí, and La Paz.¹⁸ Without the support of local law enforcement, Morales could not control the protests, and he was not willing to call on the military. The police offered a variety of reasons for their refusal to continue policing the protests. Some complained that the Morales administration lavished generous salaries and pensions on the armed forces without providing similar benefits to the police. Others claimed they were ordered by superiors to crack down only on anti-government protesters while avoiding the pro-government groups, while still others said they were simply worn down by the weeks of conflict and wanted the episode to end.¹⁹

Despite the police mutinies, Morales rejected calls for him to step down and appealed to his supporters to defend him in the streets, increasing the social conflict. As government supporters and opponents faced off in the streets, the violence escalated on both sides. In one well-known instance in the town of Vinto, outside of Cochabamba, clashes erupted that led to the death of an anti-government protester. A mob responded to the young man's death by seeking revenge on the local MAS mayor, Patricia Arce. The mob stormed the town hall and kidnapped Arce, forcibly chopping her hair off, dousing her in red paint, and then marching her barefoot through the streets before forcing her to sign an improvised resignation letter.

When the OAS finally issued its 10 November report claiming voting irregularities, Morales called for a new round of voting, but the opposition rejected the possibility. "Morales wanted to talk, but we didn't want to," said Susana Campos Elio, an opposition lawmaker from La Paz. "It was too late."²⁰ That evening General Kaliman, the commander of the armed forces, made it clear that Morales no longer had the support of the military and "suggested" he step down. After weeks of social conflict and protest, police defections, and, decisively, losing the support of the military, Morales and his closest advisors resigned and went into exile. In a period of weeks, then, one of the most popular and seemingly stable governments in Bolivia's history was ousted from power.²¹

Belarus: the uprising for change

The presidential election of 2020 in Belarus turned into a decisive moment, sparking massive protests seeking to overthrow the government of Aliaksandr Lukashenka, who had ruled the country for 26 years. While the events are still unfolding at the time of writing, continuing resistance to the Belarusian authorities under the historic white-red-white flag and the Pahonia coat of arms (charging knight on horseback) suggests that a growing number of Belarusians are striving for change.²²

How did this happen? Why did a government that has managed to stay in power in Belarus for more than a quarter of a century suddenly face such unprecedented changes in popular attitudes and the emergence of massive and persistent protests? How has Lukashenka been able to maintain power? Similar to the events in Bolivia, the political crisis in Belarus developed from a mix of three interrelated yet analytically distinguishable factors. First, we need to understand the changing social dynamics before and after COVID-19. A second factor is the actual election process and the claims of irregularities

and fraud. Finally, and decisively, the role of the armed forces and support from Russia highlights the violent response and physical force that ensured the ability of the Lukashenka government to maintain control of the government.

The emergence of a grassroots protest movement

Lukashenka became president of Belarus in 1994 on the promise to improve people's lives by combating corruption and steering the economy in the right direction after the fall of the Soviet Union. Over the years, the Belarusian economy under Lukashenka managed to recover from several economic crises and pull through due to aid from more powerful partners – Russian support, Western loans, and Chinese investment – without the introduction of serious market reforms that could weaken the existing centralized system.²³ Even the Belarusian IT sector was booming under the government's protection. In 2016, the *Wall Street Journal* labelled Belarus "the Silicon Valley of Eastern Europe."²⁴

Close ties and a special energy relationship with Russia served as an important source of stability for the Belarusian government.²⁵ For a long time, Belarus benefited from re-exporting Russian oil products it bought with subsidies. However, Russia's so-called "tax manoeuvre," which from 2015 gradually increased the price of oil for Belarus to the world level, and the "integration ultimatum," which tightly linked further financial and economic support to developing the "Union State of Russia and Belarus," which had officially been created in 1999, put pressure on the unreformed Belarusian economy.

In 2017, seeking to cut spending on welfare, the government tried to introduce a "social parasite tax" on the unemployed. This sparked a wave of protests in major cities across the country. Lukashenka was ultimately forced to cancel the decree, but fines and arrests of protesters had a discouraging effect. Belarusians abstained from mass resistance to the new decree, obliging the country's long-term unemployed to pay housing and communal bills at the full rate. The episode, however, revealed the state's inability to deliver on its promises and citizens' dissatisfaction with its performance.

The coronavirus pandemic presented a problem that could not be resolved by force. Lukashenka and his government lacked the resources to contain and mitigate the virus without undermining the country's economy.²⁶ The situation was exacerbated by the presidential election coming up in August 2020. The president's response to the coronavirus was to label COVID-19 a "mass psychosis" invented in the West and to claim that a shot of vodka, a trip to the sauna, or a ride on a tractor would keep the virus away. Lukashenka rejected strict measures against the pandemic, creating a disconnect between the public's expectations and the years of the government's heavy emphasis on political stability and guarantees of security. In such a situation, Belarusians took matters into their own hands, and this was in reality a huge step toward building a stronger civil society. For example, the crowdfunding campaign "ByCovid19," launched on 26 March, collected around US\$360,000 in three months and, with the help of thousands of volunteers across the country and from various industries, including IT, advertising, business, management, and sports, purchased and distributed tens of thousands of surgical masks, hundreds of oxygen tanks, and other medical equipment.²⁷ Belarusian doctors joined the global flash mob #StayAtHome. Belarusian opposition and civil leaders called for a "People's Quarantine," advising people to stay home and minimize all social contact.²⁸

While in Bolivia, ahead of the presidential election of 2019, Morales lost popular support from the split of various indigenous and peasant social movements and popular organizations that had brought the MAS to power, Lukashenka's cynical remarks and dismissive approach to COVID-19 in spring 2020 provided a spark for unified popular resistance and an unprecedented election challenge.

The unexpected challenge

Protests against the Lukashenka regime had been erupting with different levels of magnitude for over two decades. One of the largest demonstrations between 1991 and 2020 occurred in April 1996, when according to various estimates around 60,000 to 100,000 people protested in Minsk, the Belarusian capital.²⁹ That protest followed Lukashenka's proposal of a referendum to lengthen his term in office until 2001 and increase control over the parliament and the Constitutional Court. Over the years, besides protesting election results that were widely believed to have been falsified (1000 protesters in 2001, 10,000 in 2006, 40,000 in 2010, and 200 in 2015, according to estimates), smaller protests occurred annually on 26 April (in commemoration of the Chernobyl accident and condemning Lukashenka's exploitation of the contaminated territories for agriculture) and 25 March (in commemoration of the proclamation of the Belarusian People's Republic in 1918).³⁰ The Belarusian government brutally dispersed the protests and restored complete control over the political landscape, undermining political and social opposition even while the chances of the opposition defeating Lukashenka in a real competition remained minimal.³¹

The largest protests to challenge the Lukashenka regime erupted in August 2020, following the unprecedented violence with which the Belarusian authorities attempted to disperse people protesting what they perceived as rigged results of the presidential vote on 9 August 2020. Initially three men looked to challenge Lukashenka's presidential bid, and thousands of people stood in lines to provide signatures for the opposition candidates. But, one by one, Lukashenka eliminated them before the election. He jailed the former Belgazprombank executive Viktor Babaryka and the author of the YouTube channel "Country for Living" Siarhei Tsikhanouski, and he forced Valeryi Tsapkala, former ambassador to the US and Mexico and head of Belarus's Hi-Tech Park from 2005 to 2017, into exile.³² However, the opposition united around the seemingly unconvincing candidacy of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaia. A former schoolteacher and the wife of the arrested blogger Siarhei Tsikhanouski, Tsikhanouskaia had no political experience but stepped in to run for president instead of her jailed husband. Not feeling too threatened by Tsikhanouskaia and ignoring the signs of popular discontent, Lukashenka let the Central Election Committee register her as a presidential candidate. In the weeks before the election, Tsikhanouskaia, serving as a symbol of people's resentment, united the opposition and attracted thousands of people to her election rallies across the country, including at least 63,000 supporters in Minsk, a city of 2 million; around 20,000 supporters in Brest, a city of 340,000; and around 10,000 supporters in Hrodna, a city of 357,000.³³

Similar to the situation in Bolivia, the protests in Belarus were sparked by claims of election fraud. When Lukashenka claimed his sixth term as president with over 80% of the vote, few saw the results as credible.³⁴ The Central Election Committee reported that Tsikhanouskaia received only about 10% of the vote. While Lukashenka had long gotten

away with debatable electoral margins, this time was different; Belarusians poured into the streets to protest what they saw as an openly falsified attempt to steal the election. On election night, tens of thousands of Belarusians gathered in Minsk and across the country to protest the official results. Heavily armed riot police used flash grenades, water cannons, tear gas, and rubber bullets in an attempt to crush the protests. Hundreds were hospitalized after clashes throughout the night. The human rights centre “Viasna” (Spring) recorded 3633 politically motivated persecutions on 9 August alone, 998 of which constituted arrests.³⁵ The violent crackdown on the protesters only triggered much bigger mobilizations. Hundreds of thousands of people protested against Lukashenka in the largest mass gatherings of the country’s post-Soviet history.

Unlike Bolivia, where opposition protesters, pro-government supporters, and the police all violently clashed with each other, the protesters in Belarus have remained largely peaceful. The country has witnessed women’s marches, marches of pensioners, and marches of people with disabilities. Belarusians have been uniting through courtyard chats, gathering for tea and cookies (often in white and red colours), decorating their courtyards in red and white, and street art. Over time, in an attempt to combat the continued government crackdown, which resulted in hundreds of weekly detentions, marches changed their format: protesters began avoiding the city centres and large avenues and began gathering in columns and marching around outlying residential areas. In 2021, protests against the Lukashenka regime have become muted under the weight of Lukashenka’s repression.³⁶ The number of political prisoners in the country increased by 200% from 167 in December 2020 to 501 in June 2021.³⁷ Resistance under white-red-white colours, however, continues and takes on new forms of creativity. Graffiti and art depicting heroes of the movement and new art pieces in solidarity with the ongoing protest appear online and in different neighbourhoods of Minsk and across the country. For example, sarcastic art pieces reflecting on the dramatic events in Belarus by the well-known Belarusian artist Uladzimir Tsesler have been steadily gathering thousands of “likes” on Instagram. Another example is the satirical duo “Red Greens,” created by the Belarusian opera singer Margaryta Liauchuk and the blogger Andrei Pavuk. The duo have been trolling state propaganda in their songs, which they perform wearing green and red colours associated with Lukashenka supporters. YouTube videos by the duo appear weekly and gather hundreds of thousands of views.

Events are still unfolding, but one thing is clear even at this stage: massive crowds of Belarusians embraced the historic white-red-white colours and declared their belonging to an imagined community separate from the one with red and green symbols associated with the violence of the Lukashenka regime.

Key comparisons

Coercive capacity

We examine the coercive capacity of Bolivia and Belarus through two dimensions: the scope of the state and the loyalty of law enforcement. Extensive scope can cover large parts of society and ensure measures preventing the spread of mobilization to wide territories. Strong allegiance, in turn, is necessary to employ such brutal measures as

firing on large crowds or using water cannons and stun grenades. We find that Lukashenka managed to ensure both the wider scope of the state and higher allegiance from law enforcement than Morales in Bolivia.

In the media and on social networks, Belarus is often called a police state.³⁸ Belarus has a stronger military power than Bolivia. In 2021, Belarus ranks 50th with a military power index rating of 0.8371 (0.0000 considered “perfect”) as opposed to Bolivia, which ranks 80th with a military power rating of 1.5491, according to the Military Strengths Ranking by the Global Fire Power project, which provides a unique analytical display of data concerning 140 modern military powers based on each state’s potential war-making capability across land, sea, and air fought by conventional means. Belarus’s active personnel amounts to 45,500 (0.5% of the total population), and total military personnel is estimated at 445,500 (4.7% of the total population), in contrast to Bolivia’s 35,000 of total and active personnel (0.3% of the total population).³⁹ Figure 1 helps to visualize the difference in the quantity of armed forces personnel in Belarus and Bolivia over time.

While the army and border guards are not specifically trained for confronting riots, it is a direct responsibility of the police. In contrast to the size of the armed forces, the number of police officers in Belarus has remained a controversial topic for many years. In July 2020, the journalist Dzianis Burkouski estimated the total number of the internal affairs staff at about 69,000, of which 39,000 are police, 16,000 are security personnel, and 14,000 are servicemen of the Internal Troops of the Ministry of Internal Affairs.⁴⁰ In January 2021, BYPOL – which stands for “Belarus Police” and which was created by former law enforcement officers to oppose the Belarusian authorities – estimated the total number of internal affairs staff at 46,128 servicemen.⁴¹ In contrast, law enforcement in Bolivia is reliant on the 40,000-strong National Police Corps (*Cuerpo de Policía Nacional*) responsible for internal security and maintaining law and order. Combined

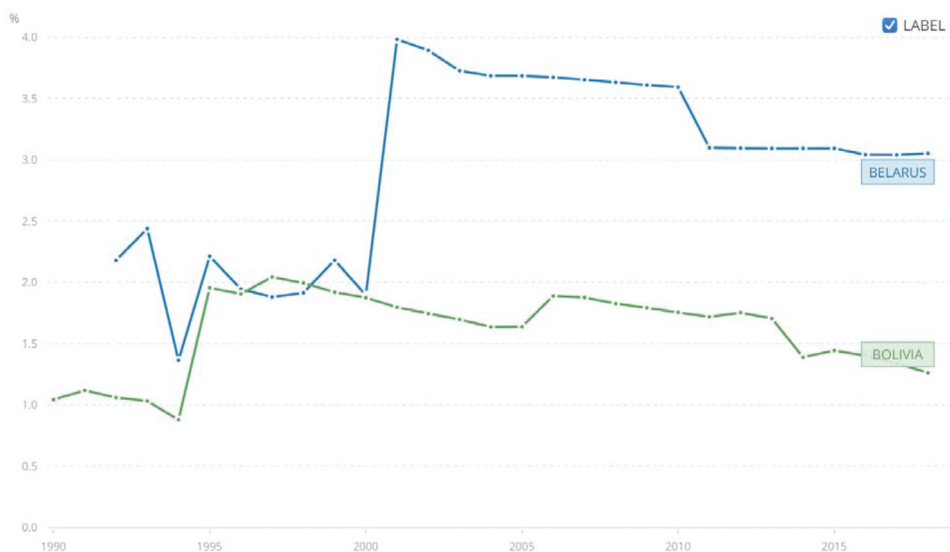


Figure 1. Armed forces personnel (% of total labour force) – Bolivia, Belarus. Source: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.TOTL.TF.ZS?locations=BY-BO>.

active military personnel and police officers per 100,000 people in Belarus (population 9,408,350 in 2020) and Bolivia (population 11,353,142 in 2020) amount to around 1095 and 661 respectively.⁴²

In Bolivia the police and military defected after three weeks of protests, leading to the resignation of Morales. In contrast, mass defections have not occurred in Belarus. As of January 2021, as reported by BYPOL, only around 2.32% of the total number of internal affairs staff had left their posts since the presidential election on 9 August 2020. Law enforcement in Belarus – the police, AMAP (*Atrad milits’yi asobaga pryznachennia*, Special Purpose Police Unit), and the army – have remained loyal to the Lukashenka government and taken an aggressive stance toward people expressing discontent. Peaceful demonstrators have been met with water cannons, tear gas, flash grenades, and rubber bullets. Violent police crackdowns on peaceful protesters have left at least eight dead.⁴³ Since the presidential vote on 9 August, based on different sources, authorities detained from over 20,000 to over 30,000 citizens exercising their right to peaceful assembly, including passers-by and journalists who were arbitrarily arrested and speedily sentenced; 501 people have been declared political prisoners.⁴⁴ The UN received reports of at least 450 documented cases of torture, including sexual abuse and rape with rubber batons.⁴⁵ However, no criminal charges have been brought against law enforcement.

In Bolivia there has historically been a rivalry between the police and the military over funding priorities and prestige, with the military always seeming to get the better of the police. The situation continued under Morales, and, viewed through this historical lens, the perceived preferential treatment of the military would seem to partially explain why the police mutinied and joined the opposition protests.⁴⁶ Despite the fact that the actual police budget increased in real terms under the MAS, the police forces felt as if it had shrunk dramatically.⁴⁷ This decline was due in large part to a decrease in international economic support, which was especially true for elite units like the FELCN (*Fuerza Especial de Lucha Contra el Narcotráfico*, Drug Control Special Force) after Morales ended the United States Drug Enforcement Administration-led war on drugs. As the head of the Cochabamba coca growers’ union, one of Morales’s goals upon taking power was to abolish US-sponsored coca eradication measures, which led to the withholding of narcotic control funds from the US government. Throughout Morales’s time in power, police units also demanded higher salaries and pensions to make them equivalent with those of the military armed forces. According to the political scientist Eduardo Gamarra, Morales miscalculated by ignoring the police force’s salary and pension demands and failed to shore up their allegiance.⁴⁸

In addition, Morales seemed to generate and sustain the allegiance of only some sectors of the military – through investments that improved and expanded military infrastructure. Just months prior to Morales’s resignation, the commander of the armed forces, General Williams Kaliman, declared himself “a soldier of the process of change” and aligned the military with the MAS’s political project of decolonization, as well as the government’s policy of hydrocarbon nationalization. However, certain sectors of the military command felt that during the 14 years of MAS rule the armed forces were ruled by a group of civilians who did not fully understand the structure or requirements of the military.⁴⁹ Members of the opposition approached these sectors during the protests in an effort to turn the armed forces against Morales.⁵⁰

Lukashenka, on the other hand, has kept all law enforcement leaders in his close proximity. His eldest son, Viktor Lukashenka, for example, served as the National Security Advisor to the President of the Republic of Belarus from 2005 until he was appointed President of the National Olympic Committee at the end of February 2021. Additionally, ahead of the presidential election, in June 2020, Lukashenka appointed the former head of the State Committee for Military Industry, Raman Halouchanka, as his new prime minister, while the new head of his presidential administration, Ihar Siarheienka, was a former first deputy chairman of the KGB.

While parts of law enforcement choose to support Lukashenka, the International Strategic Action Network for Security (iSANS) identifies several reasons that help to ensure law enforcement loyalty to the Belarusian government.⁵¹ The reasons include unpaid bank loans, stay-at-home spouses or spouses on maternity leave, lack of a civilian profession, difficulties finding different employment with comparable salary due to the poor economic situation in the country, and the binding nature of contracts for service in law enforcement agencies.⁵² By law, termination of these contracts is possible only for a violation or by mutual agreement of the parties. Alternatively, dismissal is possible for absenteeism, but in this case, the dismissed employee must repay the state for training and return the money paid under the contract. In addition, on 1 September 2020, Lukashenka portrayed himself as a defender of law enforcement by saying that he stayed in power only to protect his supporters from lustration, which he claimed would be a “massacre” if the opposition were to come to power.⁵³ On 17 May, Lukashenka approved amendments to the law on national security, one of which guarantees impunity for law enforcement in case of the use of military equipment and firearms in the suppression of riots.⁵⁴ All these factors decrease the outflow of personnel from law enforcement agencies, even if employees might disagree with the orders of their superiors.

The role of external forces

In addition to the role of the security and armed forces, another key comparison between the two cases is the influence of external actors. While external forces were involved in both Belarus and Bolivia, “an autocracy promoter” or a “black knight” played a role only in the Belarusian case. The presence of a “black knight” – Russia – in the Belarusian case and the absence of such an actor in the case of Bolivia help to explain the divergent outcomes in the two cases. Vladimir Putin provided official Minsk with signals (financial and verbal support) that it stands shoulder to shoulder with Lukashenka, increasing confidence among regime supporters that the incumbent would be able to withstand pressure from social movement protests.

The importance of Moscow as an external lifeline for Lukashenka can be seen through an analysis of repression during the first weeks of mass mobilization. After major violent crackdowns on the first three days immediately following the vote, repression ceased for two weeks. Lukashenka seemed caught off guard. As seen in [Figure 2](#), repression resumed on a massive scale only on 27 August, when Lukashenka announced that the prime ministers of Belarus and Russia would hold talks on refinancing the Belarusian state debt on the basis of his agreements with the Russian president, Vladimir Putin. In addition to verbal support for Lukashenka, recognizing him as the legitimate president, the Russian leader promised Belarus a US\$1.5 billion emergency loan. By signalling support to

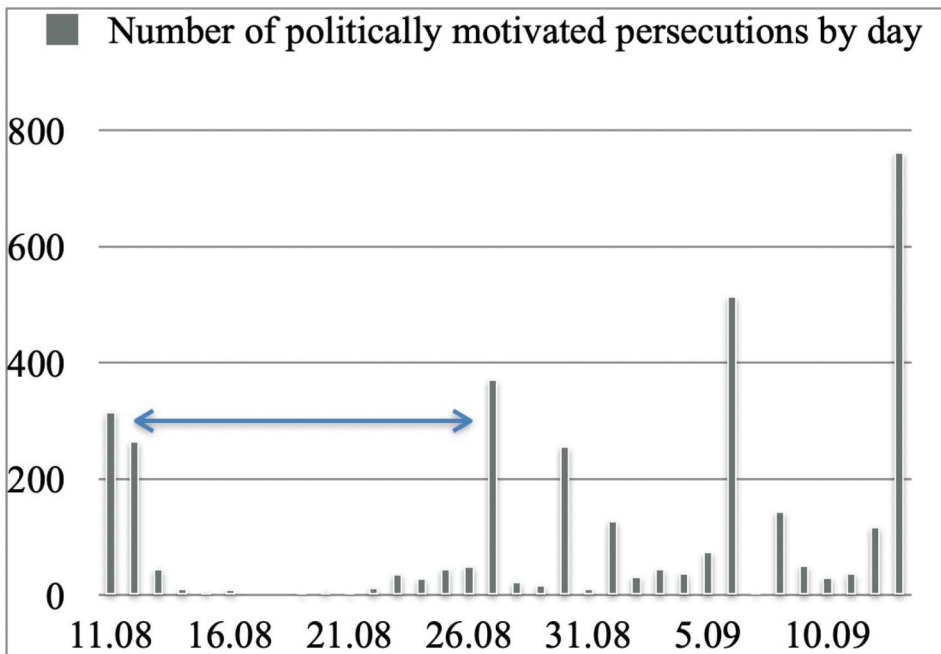


Figure 2. Number of politically motivated persecutions in Belarus during the first five weeks after the election of 9 August 2020. Source: <https://spring96.org/persecution?DateFrom=2020-08-11&DateTo=2020-09-20>.

Lukashenko, both verbally and financially, Russia provided a trump card for Lukashenko, who could now say to his apparatus and security officials that he was not alone and could sustain his grip on power.

The international expert initiative iSANS also reported that Belarus saw the main outflow of personnel from the security forces at the beginning of the unprecedented use of force against peaceful protesters following the electoral fraud on 9 August. According to the experts, more than 300 officers reported for dismissal in the main personnel department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs at the end of August 2020. Defections occurred in such law enforcement agencies as the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the KGB, the Ministry of Emergency Situations, the Investigative Committee, the Prosecutor's Office, the courts, and the armed forces. The defections decreased significantly by October and failed to become a mass phenomenon.⁵⁵

Many Western countries condemned the fraud in Belarus and the police violence that followed the vote on 9 August. The human rights centre Viasna reported that one man was killed, dozens wounded, and more than 300 arrested during the police crackdown between 9 and 10 August.⁵⁶ On 10 August, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo declared that the election had not been free and fair. In a similar fashion, the EU rejected the fraudulent election and called on the Belarusian political leadership to initiate a dialogue with the broader society to avoid further violence.⁵⁷ Germany called for the EU to reconsider its decision to lift sanctions on Belarus in 2016 to foster better relations. On 14 August, EU foreign ministers agreed to enact new sanctions against Belarusian officials responsible for the violence and falsification. Pope Francis, the United Nations, and the

Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe expressed concerns, condemned violence, and called for respect of justice and rights. At least 33 countries worldwide, including the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, refused to recognize Lukashenka's legitimacy.⁵⁸ By December 2020, the EU had imposed three rounds of sanctions, affecting a total of 88 individuals and seven entities. In December 2020, the US government adopted the Belarus Democracy Act, which "expands the President's authority to impose sanctions related to Belarus to include activities surrounding the disputed 2020 Belarusian presidential election and subsequent government crackdown."⁵⁹ In April 2021, the US resumed sanctions against large Belarusian petrochemical enterprises: Belarusian Oil Trade House, Belneftekhim, Belneftekhim USA, Belshina, Hrodna Azot, Hrodna Khimvolokno, Lakokraska, Naftan, and Polotsk Steklovolokno. On 3 June 2021, the US prohibited US citizens and businesses from conducting financial transactions with these enterprises.

In this situation, Russia has remained the only outpost of support for Lukashenka. It has provided a financial lifeline to Lukashenka's regime, although not enough to save a tanking Belarusian economy. Additionally, Russia has promised to protect Belarus from external military threats and warned foreign powers not to interfere in Belarus's affairs. The 23 May 2021 interception of a Ryanair flight carrying the Belarusian opposition journalist Raman Pratasevich and 132 other passengers over Minsk demonstrated that Lukashenka does not feel the need to respect borders, diplomatic customs, or international reactions to his actions. Putin, in turn, continued to support Belarus's authoritarian leader. He hosted Lukashenka in Sochi less than a week after the plane hijacking, and, after the two-day meeting, the Kremlin agreed to release a delayed US\$500 million credit to Belarus and increase the number of flights between the two countries. While the West reacted furiously to Lukashenka's actions and coordinated a new round of sanctions, it remains to be seen whether the new measures will help to reduce Lukashenka's feelings of impunity.

Western countries and international organizations reacted similarly in the case of Bolivia. In this case, however, there was no "black knight" to provide cover and support to Morales and the MAS. Shortly after the Bolivian election, the OAS issued a preliminary report expressing its "surprise" and "concern" with the election results without providing any evidence of irregularities or fraud.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, this initial report seemed to lend support to the opposition's claims that Morales and the MAS were trying to steal the election and helped spur the initial outbreak of protests. Morales responded by proposing an official audit of the election by the OAS that would lead to new elections if fraud was indeed found to have taken place. Throughout the two-week audit process, the OAS itself remained quiet. Yet its original, preliminary report had a significant influence on media coverage of the situation, which in turn influenced public opinion. And while the OAS remained focused on the audit, a number of individual member states, such as the United States, Brazil, and Colombia, referenced its original report in claiming the election was stolen and calling for Morales to step down.⁶¹

The OAS issued its final audit report on 10 November, citing "irregularities" in the election and pointing to instances of questionable vote tallies and a lack of accountability in the processing of the unofficial vote count.⁶² However, as the Centre for Economic Policy Research pointed out, the OAS report made a number of claims without providing evidence.⁶³ Researchers from MIT's Election Data and Science Lab made similar claims

about the OAS report and, in direct contrast with the OAS, stated, “there isn’t statistical support for the claims of voter fraud” and “the OAS’s statistical analysis and conclusions appear deeply flawed.”⁶⁴ Morales nevertheless agreed to a new vote, but it was too late, as that same day the military pulled its support for Morales, which signalled the end of his time in power.

Conclusion and cautious prognoses for Belarus

Tens of thousands of Belarusians have already paid a high price for their dreams of freedom, going through detentions, torture, and the loss of lives. In 2021, the protests have slowed down as the chances of gaining a foothold have diminished, due to brutal repression by the Belarusian authorities and support from Russia, which has helped to minimize the risk of defection among the coercive apparatus – despite the massive national protests and Western pressure for Lukashenka to give up the presidential post. In Bolivia, Morales faced a similar uprising, but he lost the support of the armed forces and faced international pressure to step down without the support of a black knight; both factors paved the way to his downfall.

These two cases highlight the role of external forces as an influencing factor of state coercive capacity vis-à-vis incumbents’ internal challengers. When a regime’s coercive capacities are both extensive and coherent, even in the face of mass protests, the presence of a black knight can improve the odds of authoritarian survival by providing financial support to the regime, allowing it to reinforce its coercive apparatus, and by reducing doubt among regime supporters that the officeholder will be able to endure. This means that even with strong coercive capacity, Lukashenka’s rule can be vulnerable in the absence of external support. Internal pressure remains a necessary factor to challenge Lukashenka, but as long as he retains Putin’s support, he will be able to rely on law enforcement to keep suppressing protests.

We have also found that the influence of international actors can stimulate pressure for regime change but also operate to ensure regime durability, depending on the context. Where the economic or political influence of external actors works to shore up the cohesion and reach of a state’s coercive apparatus, the stability of a regime increases. Even in the presence of two external actors with opposing agendas, the status of one as a “black knight” is likely to outweigh or at least minimize the influence of the other player. This means that the effect of Western pressure on the Lukashenka regime will remain limited unless it starts raising the cost for Russia to keep supporting the Belarusian regime.

Yet, while accounting for the coercive capacity of states and the influence of external actors is essential for understanding regime stability, these factors do not completely determine political outcomes. For example, nearly a year after Morales was overthrown, Bolivians overwhelmingly voted for his successor, Luis Arce, and the MAS returned to power. While Arce is not Morales and the MAS has been duly chastened, Bolivians ultimately demanded that the military return to their barracks and rejected foreign interference in their elections. In the case of Belarus, is there a certain point at which Lukashenka’s coercive capabilities and Russian support might lose their effectiveness and give way to the enduring mobilizations of civil society? History does not provide us with a definitive answer to this question, but it is certain that regimes are unable to maintain power solely through violent coercion indefinitely.

Notes

1. Weber, *From Max Weber*, 78.
2. Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions*, 15.
3. Levitsky and Way, "Dynamics of Autocratic Coercion," 393.
4. Ambrosio, *Authoritarian Backlash*; Tolstrup, "Studying a Negative"; Tolstrup, *Russia vs. the EU*; Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism*.
5. Tolstrup, "Black Knights and Elections," 678.
6. The 1952 National Revolution was a popular uprising that overturned Bolivia's pre-existing oligarchic regime, seeking to implant a form of mass democratic politics and transform the largely agrarian society's feudal relations of production in the countryside. The 1952 National Revolution set the parameters for what is now contemporary Bolivia. See, for instance, Dunkerley, *Rebellion in the Veins*; Grindle and Domingo, *Proclaiming Revolution*; Gotkowitz, *Revolution for Our Rights*; Klein, *Orígenes de la revolución*; Lora, *La Revolución Boliviana*; Malloy, *Bolivia: The Uncompleted Revolution*; Rivera Cusicanqui, *Oprimidos pero no vencidos*; John, *Bolivia's Radical Tradition*; and Zavaleta Mercado, *Lo nacional-popular en Bolivia*.
7. Hylton and Thompson, *Revolutionary Horizons*.
8. Farthing and Kohl, *Evo's Bolivia*.
9. Santiago, *When Movements Become Parties*.
10. Bautista, Chávez, and Chávez, *La Victoria Indígena*.
11. McNeish, "Extraction, Protest and Indigeneity."
12. Prada Alcoreza, *Miseria de la geopolítica*; Rivera Cusicanqui, *Mito y desarrollo*.
13. Salazar Lohman, *Se han adueñado*.
14. Organization of American States, "Preliminary Report," 94.
15. Organización de los Estados Americanos, "Análisis de Integridad."
16. Lehoucq, "Bolivia's Citizen Revolt," 138.
17. Shipani, "Tension Rises in Bolivia."
18. Lehoucq, "Bolivia's Citizen Revolt," 139.
19. Molina, "Bolivia: ¿golpe."
20. Slattery, "How Evo Morales Lost."
21. Postero, *Indigenous State*; Goodale, *Revolution in Fragments*.
22. The white-red-white flag was originally adopted in 1918 by the Belarusian People's Republic. The republic lasted for just a few months. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the white-red-white tricolour became the flag of independent Belarus. In 1995, however, Lukashenka restored the green and red flag of Soviet Belarus (albeit without the hammer and sickle), thereby making the white-red-white flag a symbol of resistance to his rule.
23. Bekus, "Belarus's Winding Path."
24. Razumovskaya, "Belarus Is Emerging."
25. Balmaceda, "Living the High Life."
26. Kulakevich, "Belarus Government."
27. Yaromich, "PPE for the People."
28. Aleksejeva, "'People's Quarantine'."
29. Charter 97, "Belarusian Spring."
30. Ash, "Election Trap." The Belarusian People's Republic, the first independent state unit of Belarusians, was proclaimed on 25 March 1918 and lasted until 1 January 1919, when the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic was declared.
31. Silitski, "Preempting Democracy."
32. "Lukashenko's Opponent Viktor Babariko"; Human Rights Centre "Viasna," "Siarhei Tsikhanouski"; "Former Belarusian Presidential Candidate."
33. "Tens of Thousands Rally"; "We Love, We Can"; "Another Record."
34. Lukashenka was declared president with 76% of the vote in 2001, 83% in 2006, 80% in 2010, and 83% in 2015.
35. Pravaabaronchy tsentr "Viasna," "Administratyuny peras'led." The figure is current as of 18 June 2021.

36. Ilyushina and Khurshudyan, "In Belarus's Withering Crackdowns."
37. See note 35 above.
38. Żochowski, "Belarus: A Police State."
39. Global Firepower, "2021 Military Strength Ranking."
40. Burkovskii, "Skol'ko v Belarusi militsionerov?"
41. "BYPOL raskryl."
42. See note 39 above.
43. Aliaksandr Taraikousky, Aliaksandr Vihor, Genadz Shutau, and Raman Bandarenka are considered victims of the protests. The circumstances of the deaths of Kanstantsin Shyshmakou, Mikita Kryutsou, Aliaksandr Dziamidau, and Artsiom Parukau are unknown. Their relatives and friends believe they could have been killed during the protests.
44. See note 35 above.
45. "U.N. Experts Alarmed."
46. Molina, "La oposición rechaza."
47. Andean Information Network, "Rough Sketch."
48. Quoted in Otis, "Veteran President's Rift."
49. "Los militares le recuerdan."
50. Romero, "Fiel a Evo hasta"; "Ministro de Defensa."
51. iSANS is an international expert initiative established in 2018 and aimed at detecting, analyzing, and countering hybrid threats against democracy, the rule of law, and the sovereignty of states in Eurasia. <https://isans.org/about-us-en>.
52. "Employment Law in Belarus." The current (as of 17 June 2021) maternity leave in Belarus consists of 126 paid days (140 if there are medical complications or if two or more children are born) and three years of unpaid maternity leave. If another child is born during these years, the maternity leave entitlement starts again. In addition to salary, law enforcement personnel in Belarus receive monthly and quarterly bonuses, financial assistance with housing, 30–45 days of vacation, medical support, and other benefits depending on the zeal of the employee and his/her experience. International Strategic Action Network for Security, "Situation in Law Enforcement."
53. "Lukashenka Named the Consequences."
54. Kłysiński and Żochowski, "Legalisation of Terror."
55. International Strategic Action Network for Security, "Situation in Law Enforcement."
56. "Poland Calls for Extraordinary."
57. Council of the European Union, "Belarus: Declaration."
58. Kulakevich, "Belarus Plane Hijacking."
59. US Congress, House of Representatives, "Belarus Democracy."
60. Organization of American States, "Preliminary Report," 94.
61. Krygier, "Bolivia Election."
62. Organización de los Estados Americanos, "Análisis de Integridad."
63. Cashman et al., "What Happened."
64. Curiel and Williams, "Bolivia Dismissed Its October Elections."

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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